

Jobs and the Illinois Elections

By Andris E. Cukurs

With just days until the Nov. 2 election, creating jobs continues to rank as the No. 1 issue in Illinois. But how will Chicago and Illinois *specifically* generate the hundreds of thousands of new jobs needed to propel us forward? And what are the major political candidates proposing in terms of innovative approaches and programs to spur jobs for the 671,000 people in Illinois who were unemployed as of August? Voters will need answers to those questions before Election Day – and then base their ballot-box choices on the candidates' answers.

For instance, what are the candidates advocating for the clean-energy industry – a prime area for new, high-paying jobs and investment in Illinois? The Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst estimates that Illinois could gain 70,000 jobs and see a net increase of about \$6.6 billion in investment revenue based on its share of clean-energy investments annually across the country.

Indeed, with its strong attributes in the clean-energy area, why shouldn't Chicago and Illinois become the Midwest's centers of renewable energy technology and investment? Are any of the candidates pushing that objective? One fledgling non-profit organization – the Clean Energy Trust – wants to achieve that goal.

This group of influential "green" business leaders and the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce are identifying promising entrepreneurs and scientists working on clean-energy projects in a variety of clean-tech sectors. Already, it has raised more than \$2.5 million in cash and in-kind services to help as seed money. That initiative promises to spur new jobs in clean technology – from renewable energy, next-generation transportation, the smart grid electrical-transmission system and energy efficiency programs, among others. For every \$1 million in spending, clean-energy investments create 16.7 jobs, while spending on fossil fuels, by contrast, generates only 6.3 jobs, estimates the Political Economy Research Institute.

Consider what wind-energy projects alone contribute to creating jobs. Illinois had 22 such projects as of July 20, 2010, ranking 6th in the U.S. in existing electrical capacity of more than 1,800 megawatts. They generate jobs for construction, electrical work, steel workers, riggers, truck drivers and the like. A recent Illinois State University study found that in Illinois, each new wind-turbine project generates 1,473 new jobs during construction.

Illinois State University Economics Professor Dave Loomis cites the state's good wind resource and relatively unconstrained transmission. He also says Illinois' Renewable Portfolio Standard has stimulated wind-energy projects. That standard, cleared by state lawmakers, requires utilities to buy one-quarter of their electric generation from renewable-energy sources, such as wind farms, by 2025.

As for clean energy, wind produces no emissions and consumes no water. Additionally, wind-energy generation doesn't consume any non-renewable resources, such as oil, natural gas or coal. Wind is free and, with today's technology advances, it can be captured efficiently, at one-

quarter the cost of solar power. In addition, the U.S. has enough wind resources to generate electricity for every home and business in the nation,

Besides, strong consumer support exists for wind. An October 2010 survey by Rasmussen Reports, found that 58 percent of U.S. voters think finding new sources of energy is more important than reducing the amount of energy Americans now consume. Politicians are taking heed and at the state-level are putting structure in place to encourage renewable energy growth. Just like Illinois, more than half of the states and the District of Columbia have passed a renewable-energy standard.

Still, Illinois' clean-energy jobs future will be even more promising if Congress passes its own National Renewable Electricity Standard. The House already has passed such a measure but it has languished in the Senate..

Certainly, other major job-creation initiatives are being advanced. But renewable energy constitutes such a promising area that it serves as a good starting point to judge Illinois' political candidates. It's up to Illinois voters to insist that the candidates, before Election Day, be as specific as possible about how they would create new jobs for the state. As a starting point, let's ask them how they would spark clean-energy jobs.

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